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ABSTRACT

This paper is a description of action research in progress centered on the development of a School/Community Planning Team as a vehicle for long-range educational planning. At present, 10 teams exist which are composed of small groups of 6-12 persons including citizens, professional educators, and students. Each team is charged with the development of long-range proposals in a specific area of school life, such as alternatives in elementary education, the education of early adolescents, and variety and depth of curriculum. Teams have numerous volunteers and research support provided by a small professional staff. The teams relate administratively to the board of education and with other teams through a Design Management Team. Three sets of variables are being studied to ascertain the impact of the teams on the educational process: (1) those relating to who participates in the teams, (2) those relating to the successful functioning of the teams internally, and (3) those variables relating to how the work of the teams is utilized by the board of education and the rest of the school system. (Author/MLF)

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THE SCHOOL/COMMUNITY PLANNING TEAM AS A SOCIAL INVENTION

A Discussion Paper on Research in Progress

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I. Introduction

This paper is a description of action research in progress. The research is centered on the development of the School/Community Planning Team as a vehicle for long range educational planning.

The basic idea of the Team was not copied from any known model. The Teams were, in fact, invented by a committee. Putting aside all the jokes about things designed by committees, some committees produce good results. With thousands of committees in education meeting daily across the country, chance alone accounts for some happy outcomes! In any case, a committee invented the School/Community Planning Teams. This was a typical blue-ribbon committee, appointed by the Board of Education, charged with developing a means for conducting long-range planning for the Palo Alto Unified School District. Predictably, a structure was invented which called for the participation of students, staff and citizens, since the original committee was participatory in nature and included persons from these groups.*

In this brief paper, a short description of the Teams will be given to help clarify how they differ or do not differ from other participatory school committees with which we are all familiar.

Following that, the major research expectations and variables will be stated.

The effort will be made to place this research in the context of the broader picture of studies in community/staff/student participation in school decision making, and the broader picture of efforts in long range educational planning. This project is just entering the second year of a three-year life; full development of all these matters will be contained in major reports at the completion of the project.

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* The term "participation" requires at least some clarification. Participatory planning is one form of participatory decision making. Participatory decision making is defined as a "mode of organizational operation in which decisions as to activities are arrived at by the very persons who are to execute those decisions." (Lowin, 1968) This definition is too restrictive for our purposes. A better definition would be, "a mode of organizational operation in which decisions are arrived at by a process in which those affected by the decisions are involved or consulted, or have the opportunity, before decisions are made." Participation implies voluntary activity not specified in job descriptions.

II Description of the Teams

School/Community Planning Teams are small groups of six-to-twelve persons. Each group includes citizens, professional educators and students among its members.

Each Team is charged with the development of long range proposals in a specific area of school life. At present ten Teams are at work, in the following areas:

1. Alternatives in Elementary Education
2. The Education of Early Adolescents
3. School/Community Relationships
4. Requirements for Completion of Secondary Education
5. Long Range District Finance
6. Teacher-Learner Relationships in Secondary Education
7. Variety and Depth of Curriculum
8. Extent and Form of Special Services
9. Future Administrative Needs
10. Issues in Primary Education

Coordination between the teams is accomplished by a central Team called the Design Management Team. Teams are expected to develop detailed long-range plans. These plans or proposals are to be "validated" before being offered for active consideration. The term "validation" means that homework must be done on research applicable to the proposal or on experience with similar proposals elsewhere; validation also requires evidence that proposals will find acceptance in the community and among the students and staff. A statement frequently made to the Teams is, "Your opinions don't matter." The point of this comment is that these are not bull-session groups, but planning groups charged with the careful development and utilization of information and ideas.

The School/Community Planning Teams have research support provided by a small professional staff and numerous volunteers. This is a crucial element. Research skills are taught to the volunteers as needed. This increases the research capacity and research-mindedness of the District. In some instances technical consultation is provided by outside experts hired for the purpose.

The Teams relate administratively to the Board of Education through the Design Management Team. This relationship is another important element of the theory of the Teams. By means of the Teams, the thinking and planning capacity of the Board is expanded. The focus of the work of the Teams is not on operational concerns. The line authority of the administration is not directly affected. Operational concerns can result in the aborting of long-range thinking and planning if long range planning and daily operations are not separated, because of time pressures or for other reasons. The administrative relationship of the Teams with the Board provides a high degree of independence for the work of the Teams, while at the same time it provides access to the life of the District.

Some important points to note about the Teams include the following:

First, no claim is made that the Team members represent all teachers, all students, or all members of the community. This point deserves careful attention. The principle of representation widely pervades school committees as an organizing principle.

One of the reasons for utilizing the principle is to achieve legitimacy for the group. Another common method of achieving legitimacy is to have committees appointed by a higher authority: common "blue ribbon" committees are the best example.

These methods of achieving legitimacy are most appropriate for political bodies. School/Community Planning Teams are not conceived as political bodies, however, but as technical planning agencies for the Board of Education. While they must be recognized as legitimate by the professional staff, by the administration, and ultimately by the community, that means recognition as a reasonable and fruitful procedure by which to do the planning. That, we believe, depends heavily on the quality of their work, rather than upon the pedigrees of the members as Board appointees or as representatives from constituencies. The quality of the process is as important as the quality of the product. The process involves careful interaction with the professional staff, students and community during the work of planning, so that the final outcomes will have achieved legitimacy among those who may be affected when plans are implemented.

To restate some principles: Planning Team members do not come onto the Teams as representatives or as appointees. They are volunteers from among the ranks of teachers, students, administrators and citizens. Anyone can volunteer. Some persons are recruited. Some Team members are well-known and serve on many committees. Others are new faces. The goal in staffing Teams is to put together groups of motivated people capable of achieving high quality work.

The fact that Team members are not appointees or representatives makes it mandatory that they be in touch with the thinking of the professional staff, parents and students as studies are made and proposals developed. Surveys, workshops, open meetings and other devices can be utilized for this purpose.

Support is provided for Planning Teams, including technical research support, procedural advice and secretarial help. The Teams are self-governing to a high degree. They are provided with a "charge" or charter and with suggested procedures for getting organized. Expectations are established for outcomes; some funds are available for each Team to use for consultation or other purposes.

The type of participation under study and development in this project may be summarized by describing it as a new role in public schools: the role of the volunteer at the policy level of the organization who engages in study and research under the direct sponsorship of the Board, with technical and administrative support, working in peer relationships for this limited purpose with students, professional staff and citizens.

Finally, some of the differences between these Teams and other task forces and committees, at least in this District, are as follows:

1. The Teams are charged to do planning. This is interpreted as going beyond the formulation of recommendations, and places much emphasis on the development and use of research data.

2. The Teams are charged with careful assessment of the desires and opinions of the community and staff, but are not chosen to represent these constituencies in the political sense.

3. The education and technical support provided for the participants is taken very seriously. The expectation is that team members, and everyone involved in the Project, are learning at all times.

4. Citizens, professional staff members and students are charged to work together as peers.

5. The focus of the work is on long-range planning issues. This includes short range decisions which have long-range implications.

6. The direct relationship with the Board of Education combined with professional staff support makes the Teams in effect a planning staff for the Board of Education.

III Some Research Issues

The reader may well have questions in mind by this time. These undoubtedly include questions about the actual influence of these Teams on decisions having long term consequences.

It should be noted that the community in which this is taking place is not sharply polarized or otherwise sharply divided along ideological, racial, or economic lines, although the range of these variables is large. The community is highly supportive of the school system, as evidenced by a recent survey.

It will have been noted that this is not a political model of organization change or of citizen participation. The Teams are not partisan groups to add to groups already active in the system. The relationship of the Teams to the administration and Board of Education is somewhat analogous to the relationship between planning departments and commissions and city government, although the analogy must not be pushed too far. The Teams are intended to be the setting for a planning-thinking-learning process on major educational issues which otherwise does not go on in the system because neither the Board of Education nor the administration have the time and energy to devote to it in the press of daily work.

Whether the School/Community Planning Teams will succeed and have an important impact on the educational process depends, of course, on many variables. We have isolated three sets of variables for careful study:

1. Variables relating to who participates in this planning process. This includes those who sign up, those who stay, those who drop out, and at least some of those who deliverately choose not to participate.

2. Variables relating to the successful functioning of the Teams internally.

3. Variables relating to how the work of the Teams is utilized by the Board of Education and the rest of the school system.

Brief comments will be made about each of the three.

1. Participation

   This Project is an effort on the part of the school district to engage citizens, students and professional staff persons in a voluntary participatory process differing in some respects from typical task forces or citizen committees. It represents an attempt to invent, develop and refine participation by staff, citizens and students beyond what has been practiced in the past.

   Participants in school district affairs who are neither employees nor students may be described as persons who enter the organization, not as clients, employees, or guests, to be involved in some process important to the organization. Such processes may include teaching, governance, staff support, political activity, or research. For their efforts, these persons receive something of value (not including money) and the organization benefits in return. Since they are not clients, employees or guests, we have no good word to describe them. They come close to being what voluntary associations such as churches call members.

By virtue of the exchange relationship set up, they have a right to be within the organization. In many districts such individuals are present by the dozens, hundreds or even thousands. The number of them has increased substantially during the past several years. This is not a fact of insignificance in contemporary school management.

Who participates voluntarily, and in what capacity, may have as much to do with the success of the educational process as who is hired and paid by the organization. Just add up their impact: Board members, faithful Board watches, volunteer teacher aides, PTA workers, special interest group parents, guest teachers in classes, office volunteers, members of advisory committees and task forces, and so on. The organization has no control (or very little) over who comes as a student; increasingly it has little control over who works as a professional, since most professionals have tenure. The deliberate actions of the organization have much more effect on who participates voluntarily, and in what capacity. Many forms of participation are possible beyond those most familiar to school administrators.

On close examination, participation turns out to be a highly complex phenomenon, at least as complex as who teaches, who administers, or who learns what in the classroom. It may be debated whether this complexity deserves the intensive study directed to these other issues. In any case, less study has been so directed. Studies of voluntary participation that are most familiar relate participation to social class, race, ethnicity, religion, sex, age and other sociological variables. Often underlying these studies are models that predict participation on the basis of class interest or socio-economic standing. While these are useful, the usefulness is limited, just as knowing the social origins of teachers is of only limited value when attempting to develop a more effective teaching staff.

The most familiar models of participation, particularly in discussing citizen participation, are political models, based on understanding participation as the redistribution of power. Arnstein provides a one-dimensional "ladder of citizen participation" for example (Cibulka, 1974) which considers only the degree to which citizen participants are perceived as ranging from being subject to manipulation by administrators to being given "actual decision making power." Saxe provides another one-dimensional continuum of citizen participation ranging from bureaucractic control to community control. (Saxe, 1974) Political models of participation constitute only one of many sets of possibilities. One-dimensional political models can lead to unfortunate misunderstanding of the possible outcomes of participation, particularly if they imply

that what participants gain is power, and that power comes in fixed quantities, so that increased participation constitutes taking power away from someone else in the system. Participants can gain many things besides power, of course. They may gain education, pleasure, satisfaction, experience, etc. Even if they do gain power, it need not be at the expense of someone else. "Power" or "influence" is an organization such as a school system is not a fixed quantity. Everyone may gain power and influence in successful participation efforts, just as everyone may profit by successful commercial transactions. There is considerable evidence on this point. See Tannebaum, 1968, especially.

In the present project, the attempt is made by the school district to draw participants into a planning and development process. The goal is to increase the District's ability to conduct a good educational program by enlisting persons with specific interests and skills who will engage in a learning-planning process which otherwise would not take place, and do this on a voluntary basis.

A number of variables are expected to show a significant relationship to participation of this type. Some variables are expected to relate to durability of participation. These include disposable time, perceived responsiveness by the Board and administration to the work and internalization of this new role of participatory planner.

The study of participation in this Project involves the participation of students and professional staff members as well as the participation of citizens. The problems, and the expectations, in these cases are somewhat different than in the case of citizens.

2. Internal processes of the School/Community Planning Teams

The second set of variables relates to the internal working of the School/Community Planning Teams.

The research here is descriptive. The goal is not to develop and test hypotheses about small groups, but to relate what is observed within the Team to what is known about the operation of small groups and to clarify the differences between the different teams in the project. There is not time here for a detailed discussion of variables and measurements. Certain points may be stated briefly.

Specific research on groups similar to these is scarce. Inevitably we are engaged in exploratory work. The teams have some features which distinguish them from other small groups with other objectives.

Membership in a School/Community Planning Team constitutes a new role for most participants: the role of participatory planner, backed up by a professional staff, relating to the Board of Education. New roles are ambiguous; some persons grasp them quickly and enjoy them more than other persons. The teams as planning bodies are not the same as collective decision-making bodies, nor the same as other task-oriented groups designed to carry out other kinds of projects. The role stresses the gathering and using of information and ideas. The role is a learning role; as in all situations, some enjoy learning more than others.

Since the teams operate within a school district, some participants bring with them norms and expectations for work in school district groups and committees which are not necessarily appropriate for work in <u>these</u> groups. Status differences enter the picture. Value differences are very much a factor, also. Since the teams do not have to be representative, it is quite possible for groups to be developed which consist of individuals with a high degree of agreement on values. Many school groups and committees appear to flounder because so much energy must be spent reconciling value differences between members. There appears to be no compelling reason why methods should not be found and utilized for bringing people together who have similar values.

Developments in planning teams sometimes appear to resemble in microcosm processes that occur in large organizations under conditions March and his colleagues describe in their "garbage can" model of organizational decision making. (Cohen, March and Olsen 1972) Feelings are brought in which have been looking for a place to be aired. Solutions are brought which may or may not apply to problems under study, but which are promoted regardless, usually before the problems to which they may apply are known. Problems are presented which are not amenable to solution, or which are not relevant to the work at hand. People tend to come and go as individuals search for signals to convince them that this form of participation is good or not good for them, and as they come and go, problems and solutions and feelings arrive and leave. (Apologies to March and his colleagues for this somewhat loose use of their terms.)

While all these events are occurring, work is accomplished.

It must be remembered that this is an action research project. As the project proceeds, we are learning how to help individuals participate in a manner which is rewarding to them, how to organize teams, and how to assist teams to function successfully. As we learn, the knowledge is applied. We expect to have a body of useful information on the internal operation of participatory planning groups at the conclusion of the project, two years hence.

3. Relating the work of the teams to the Board of Education and the school system.

The relationship between the work of the School/Community Planning Teams and the school system must first be considered in the general context of long range planning efforts in school systems.

For various reasons, long range planning efforts are often regarded as an administrative frill. Everyone knows of cases where long range plans are only window dressing.

Frequently, long range planning efforts are confined to para-educational matters such as enrollment projections, staff costs and needs, building needs, and the like. There is little attention in planning processes to such matters as student/teacher relationships or major curricular issues. Planning has usually been considered a technical, value free activity, conducted by professionals in central offices, quite remote from life in the classroom.

All long range planning is beset by problems, technical, psychological, and political. At the same time there is general agreement that the most pressing problems have developed over a long time span, and that finding solutions to major problems in education as well as responding to new needs and opportunities requires foresight and a lot of lead time.

If long range planning or long range thinking of any kind is to be attempted in school districts, there are good reasons for doing it by means of a participative process rather than hiring professionals to do it. The cost of full professional planning staffs alone is one argument. A second argument familiar to all students of change is that effective planning eventually involves changes, and significant changes must have the understanding and support of those affected. Apart from the practical issues there are the moral issues: the right of the public to shape its own institutions rather than being subjected to social engineering technologies.

Students of long range social planning such as Michael (1973) argue that long range social planning must be conceived as a learning process: a learning process for everyone involved in the whole system for which planning is being accomplished. If that is true, then we must ask the question: can <u>schools</u> engage in a <u>learning</u> process? The conditions specified by Michael before it can take place are quite demanding.

The form of planning being conducted in this project is a learning process. Members of the community, students and staff members are drawn into the organization to become planners, and they in turn will relate what they are learning with others throughout the system and the community.

The question remains: on what basis do we expect the output of this participative planning effort to be accepted and implemented by the District?

One variable we expect to be strongly related to acceptance of the work is the expectations the District administration and the Board of Education have for the School/Community Planning Teams.

A second variable is the degree to which the work of the teams carries the District toward goals which are already in the minds of the Board and leaders in the District. Another way of putting it is to say that the work of a team will be accepted more readily if it represents a solution to a problem which others recognize as a problem or can be persuaded to recognize as a problem. Good solutions which in fact resolve problems are not in oversupply.

Acceptance by the Board and the school system of the work of a team does not necessarily mean the acceptance of a proposed solution, in order for the team to have succeeded. The Board and the system may accept a problem rather than a solution. The real acceptance of a problem into the system may be as significant as the acceptance of a solution.

Success in what is termed the validation process, and perceptions of that success, are a third major variable relating to the acceptance of the work of the teams by the system.

It is recognized that factors totally outside any planning effort not infrequently result in decisions being made which ignore the best conceived plans and ideas. Expectations may be high on all sides, but it may be impossible to reach necessary decisions because of the press of an unmanageable number of matters to be decided. When decisions are finally reached, they may not represent what anyone wanted. In the garbage can model of organizational decision making discussed earlier, unimportant matters are frequently decided by deliberate resolution, while important choices, perhaps affecting thousands of lives, are made by what the authors term "oversight" or "flight". In other words, the choice just finally happens because something <u>has</u> to happen, but the choice which is made is likely not to solve the problems.

At issue here is whether a participative planning process can operate in such a way that better long range decisions are made, at least on some issues. We are only beginning to scratch the surface on that one.

Apart from the use of the work of the teams by the District, we are examining other potentially significant results of this project: the training of a large number of people in school district affairs; the interaction of students, citizens and professional staff members on educational issues; the increasing of the amount of information available to professional staff members through the planning activity.

Since the work of this project is just getting well underway, we invite inquiries and opportunities to share insights with others doing related research.

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